

# from the German Side



**R**OCK WASTES, ARID, BARREN, desolate terrain, interspersed with patches of sand, where meagre clumps of desert thorns grow, where the African sun burns down mercilessly in July—that was the Alamein Front. It was situated between the rock-bound heights of Tel el Eisa on the Mediterranean coast and the 200-meter-high pyramid of Garet el Himeimat on the Qattara Depression, the only position secure against encirclement on either flank on the entire North African desert.

There stood what remained of Rommel's army, exhausted after the heavy battles of Tobruk and the pursuit which followed—opposed by, it is true, the defeated, but still battle-worthy troops of the Empire. The infantry had to build stone walls about them, since the hard rock floor of the terrain offered no cover from enemy fire. "Our strength has waned," wrote Rommel in his diary on 3 July 1942. With only 13 battle-worthy tanks we had arrived before Alamein. Of the 4 British defensive emplacements on this position we were only able to seize one in the first attack. Two additional emplacements fell into our hands later. The main position of Alamein with the only fresh-water well in this entire desolate area remained in the hands of the British in spite of our desperate attacks. Already, in these July days, the battle of el Alamein had begun.

"The British Fleet is hastily abandoning Alexandria and heading east," reported our air reconnaissance. We later heard that the British took precautionary measures for the defense of the Nile Delta in case

Rommel should succeed in breaking through the gates of Egypt. And, as a precaution, they had prepared plans for a retreat to Palestine, and if necessary, as far as Iraq, in the event that the Nile Delta could not be held.

Gen Auchinleck, however, had no intentions of giving up el Alamein. We felt that immediately. Throughout all of July the Eighth Army attacked our position in order to seize the initiative again. On 10 July the Australians seized the heights of Tel el Eisa west of Alamein. They held this position despite our heavy counterattacks. On 14 July the New Zealanders and Indians launched a night attack, designed to capture the terrain of the strategically important area of Ruweisat Ridge. During the night of 16 July the Australians took the high ridge of Al Makh Ahad in the south.

Rommel conducted an attack against Ruweisat on 18 and 19 July. It was repulsed. While the Australians pushed forward again in the

north on 21 July, a New Zealand division, reinforced with tanks, attacked the center of our front in order to dislodge us from our position. The breakthrough failed. A new offensive was launched in the north at Tel el Eisa on 26 July by the 9th Australian Div. Our counterattack was able to ward off a catastrophe.

Auchinleck obviously came to the conclusion, on 30 July, that with the forces available he was not able to conduct further operations. The Alamein Front was stabilized.

In August, Churchill appeared in Cairo on his flight to Moscow. We soon knew from the regrouping of forces in the Western Desert, that the nervous tension which the presence of our Panzers at the gates of Egypt had created, was now over. Gen Sir Harold Alexander was named Commander-in-Chief for the Middle East—one of the best strategic as well as political brains available to the Empire.

At the same time, the command of the British Eighth Army was taken over by Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, one of the most unusual but also gifted generals of the British Army—a discerning strategist who had a great understanding for the requirements of mechanized war. Montgomery could be as arbitrary and unpredictable in his associations with his superiors as with his subordinates, but his strategic plans nevertheless bore the stamp of a rigid system. His requirement for each battle which he conducted was complete matériel superiority.

According to his own war memoirs (*Alamein to the River Sangro*) he

Rock-hard terrain offered no cover



saw as his most important assignment the strengthening and deepening of the British defenses of the Alamein position. All the previous instructions and plans for any further retreat of the Eighth Army to the Middle East he rescinded immediately. He left no doubt that a surrender of the Alamein line was completely out of question. In case Rommel attacked again he would engage in battle immediately — on position. He ordered each division to commit their troops only as complete units. The practice of splitting units which had led to defeat, came to an end. Along with this tactical transposition he also ordered that tanks and artillery be committed only in mass from now on, in recognition of the fact that one can never be strong enough at the decisive point and that the shortage of men must be equalized or overcome by an overwhelming amount of matériel. After he had taken the necessary steps for the strengthening of the defense, he turned his attention to the basic reorganization of the army and the formation of a new corps, which was to be capable of exploiting success in a battle of matériel following an effective breakthrough. The matériel superiority of the British, thanks to the complete mobilization of the British industry and the tremendous American support, gradually became overpowering. Tanks, aircraft, artillery of all calibers, trucks, gasoline and ammunition, came in vast quantities around the Cape of Good Hope into Port Said, Suez and Alexandria.

For us, on the other hand, our supplies, which came across the seas, sank to 6,000 tons of supply goods per month — only  $\frac{1}{5}$  of our normal requirements. Three quarters of all convoys were sunk by British air and sea power. To build a stock pile for the decisive battle of the future was impossible. The Royal Air Force had reached hitherto unprecedented heights of strength and combat effectiveness. Against it the air power of Kesselring gradually melted away. He did not receive any replacements. Hitler needed everything in Russia. The German fighter squadrons became very small in numbers; even Capt Marseille, ace of the African sky, with 158 air victories, had met a hero's death.

Malta won its importance as a base for the fight against the convoys back and forth between Italy and North Africa, inasmuch as the greater portion of the transports went from southern Italy to Benghazi, the principal transfer point for German and Italian supplies. The convoy routes lay within effective striking range of Malta. Tobruk did not have sufficient tonnage capacity; therefore there was an endless column of supply vehicles from the harbor to the positions before Alamein. These were constantly menaced by the Royal Air Force. This method of supply consumed precious fuel and required that the transport columns were overburdened more than necessary. The distance from the battlefront to Tobruk was 550 km; from the major port of Benghazi, 1,000 km; and from Tripoli, where many supplies also arrived, it was over 2,000 km. On the other hand the British supply lines from Alexandria and Suez were only 90 km and 350 km, respectively.

If Malta remained in British hands and Kesselring's air power was not increased at the same time, then sufficient support for the front in Africa was impossible. But at that time Hitler would not consider seizing the island fortress. It was maintained that Alamein could have very easily been resupplied from Crete, and Malta could have been neutralized by heavy air attacks as was Dunkirk in 1940. (At that time Adolf Hitler announced with arrogant pride, "Dunkirk will be turned over to the German Luftwaffe" — thereby delivering the British Expeditionary Corps.) In a sober strategic estimate of our situation in August 1942, it had to be recognized that now a situation existed in which neither of the deadly threats to the axes of supply in the rear of the army (Allied control of the air on one hand and naval base of Malta on the other) had been destroyed. Nor could the situation be expected to improve, by gaining the Nile Delta right in the lap of British strength in the Eastern Mediterranean. Rommel's army was halted in the middle of the desert, far from its base of supply, while the enemy superiority in the air grew stronger daily. On

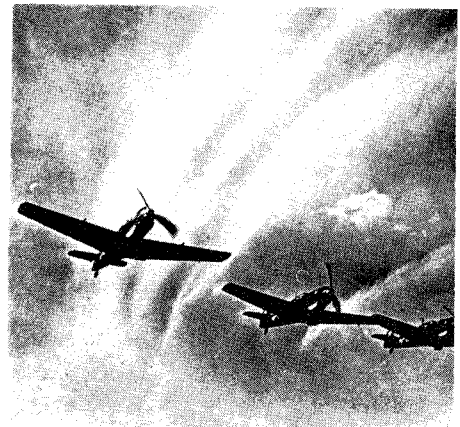


**Endless supply columns — always menaced by the RAF**



**Gasoline from Tripoli — 2,000 kms from the front**

Wide World



**German airpower melted away  
Troops were weary and exhausted**

Bayerlein





On the Alamein Front the possibilities to refresh and rest the troops were negligible

the other hand the possibilities for improving our own combat effectiveness, even to rest and refresh the exhausted troop units, were negligible at best.

These considerations then raised a question. In spite of the advantage of the Alamein position, anchored on both flanks—would it not be wiser to break off contact and move away from the enemy in time, and thereby abandon the worthless desert terrain and the long supply route to the enemy? The offensive power of our army could have been renewed, undisturbed by the enemy, in one of the prepared defensive positions closer to the supply center, perhaps at Sollum. In the meantime, we could have conducted a landing operation on Malta. This was Rommel's own idea. However, Hitler completely closed his mind to any such thoughts of moving backward; his goal was the Suez Canal.

Consequently nothing happened. Neither was Malta attacked nor did Rommel's army move back. That was the decision upon which the life or death of the Alamein Front depended. Rommel's supply situation necessarily had to become catastrophic. Every expectation of winning the Nile Delta and the Suez Canal now vanished. Thereby the hopes of a great pincer movement—to be conducted from the north out of the Ukraine and over the Caucasus; and from the south out of the Western Desert over the Suez Canal and on to the oil fields of the Middle East, exposing the wide open southern flank of the Soviet Union—faded away more and more.

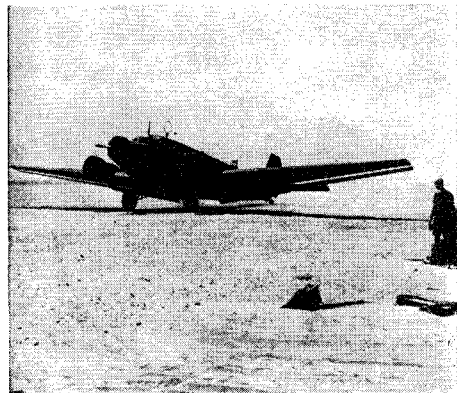
### Now or Never — Alam el Halfa

In spite of this, Hitler calmly ordered preparations for the attack on the Nile Delta. Even the Italian High Command implored Rommel not to move back under any circumstance. Mussolini himself came to North Africa and waited impatiently in Derna for the moment when the Panzers of the Axis would appear among the pyramids and parade before him.

Soon, however, Rommel had to settle with both of his dictators. The troops originally destined for the attack on Malta were now given to him as reinforcements. Finally it had to happen, that Rommel was forced to make his decision to attack the British Alamein position and to break through to the Suez Canal. He made this contingent upon his receiving several thousand cubic meters of gasoline by water or by air. Now or never, it was Rommel's belief that he could once more attempt the drive to the Delta. In conversations on 27 August, Marshals Kesselring and Cavallero guaranteed him that he would receive 6,000 tons of gasoline, of which 1,000 would come by air. Rommel stated, "The battle is dependent upon the prompt delivery of this gasoline." Cavallero answered, "You can begin

Marshal Cavallero and Rommel: "You can begin the battle now, Herr Feldmarschall, the gasoline is already underway."

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Kesselring guaranteed 1,000 tons of gasoline would be delivered by air

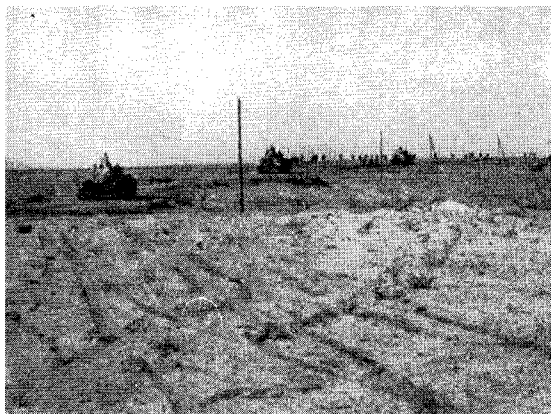
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In the night of 31 August Rommel launched the attack. Even then the British had a superiority in artillery, ammunition and tanks. Unopposed, the RAF controlled the air. We were short of tanks and ammunition. A frontal attack through the strong British line therefore was out. Rommel searched for the only other possibility, the enveloping attack. He conducted diversionary attacks in the northern part of the front, an audacious secondary attack from the center, then the main attack in the south. His intention was to break through along the Qattara Depression where the British concentrations were weakest, then to swing in to the north, passing east of Alam el Halfa and on to the coast at El Hammam. Thereby, he hoped to roll up the entire enemy position, exactly as he had three months earlier at Gazala. Had this plan succeeded, then the Eighth Army would have been encircled and its access to its supply in the rear cut off. Both Generals Alexander and Montgomery had reckoned with this plan. Montgomery, as soon as he had arrived in the Western Desert—as we later learned—heavily fortified the most important ridge, Alam el Halfa, and prepared it for defense by placing the greater part of his armor there. He even allowed a map to fall into our hands on which the terrain south of Alam el Halfa was shown as trafficable for armored vehicles. Actually, it was bottomless sand which would create extreme difficulties for our wheeled vehicles.



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Rommel watches an Italian unit move up the coast road at Sidi Abd el Rhaman



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Panzers moving up along the telegraph lines south of Abd el Rhaman

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... the battle is dependent upon the prompt delivery of gasoline!



The rock wastes of the desert floor in the center of the Alamein line

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Flat-top heights just west of the Qattara Depression  
The Qattara Depression as seen from Abu Dweis

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The author in the desert

